

Why St. John Paul II's warnings about the 'culture of death' matter in a pandemic

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St. Pope John Paul II kisses a baby during a General Audience at the Vatican in 2001. (Catholic News Service/Paolo Cocco, Reuters)

The feed on my phone refreshes each morning with a new number in red: as I write today, 84,763 deaths from the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the U.S.

In the information age, we collect a lot of data about a lot of things. But few numbers make headlines outside of business media. *These* numbers, though, are important because they represent lives we have lost to a virus. *These* numbers tell us how bad things are, how much times have changed, how far we are from normal, that we're in a crisis. That's true.

But here are some more numbers from the U.S.:

- [68,029](#) — the number of deaths due to overdoses between February 2018 and February 2019, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC).
- [48,000](#) — the number of deaths to suicide in 2018, according to the CDC.

- [16,214](#) — the number of deaths due to murder and non-negligent manslaughter in 2018, according to the FBI.
- [1,095,000](#) — the estimated number of aborted babies a year in the United States, representing roughly 22% of all pregnancies, according to numbers from the World Health Organization.

These are deaths, too. Yet they rarely make headlines, and few would ever think of describing them as a “crisis.” At most, they might consist of “issues.” We don’t have to think hard to know why. The answer, even if unspoken, is just beneath the surface: *What do those numbers have to do with me? Somebody getting an abortion isn’t going to get me sick, I don’t take hard drugs, am not severely depressed, and I live in a safe neighborhood.*

Fair enough, as the logic of self-interest goes.

But that’s not what we’re hearing from our elected leaders during the coronavirus crisis. For example, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York (the same governor who signed into law one of the most permissive abortion policies in the nation) [said](#) recently, “Nothing is worse than death” as justification for the stay-at-home orders in his state.

Death is bad, the worst, he argued, and we should avoid it at all costs. His underlying principle is that all lives are valuable. The epidemic constitutes a crisis, therefore, because it is an event in which many people are dying from causes that we, as a society, have some control over.

If it is true that this constitutes a crisis, then we should also be ready to admit that we’ve been living in a matrix of overlapping crises for a long time.

Many people have been dying recently because of preventable causes — many of them among society’s most vulnerable. Yet those deaths don’t register, even though they’re tallied and categorized. They don’t haunt us, don’t make us act beyond a superficial, what-a-pity shake of the head.

Why is that the case if we *really* believe that the definition of a crisis is not just a threat to self-interest, but rather, the presence of widespread and preventable death?



St. Pope John Paul II sits with his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in Rome's Rebibbia Prison in 1983. (Catholic News Service/Arturo Mori, L'Osservatore Romano)

During his long papacy, St. Pope John Paul II lamented the emergence of what he coined “the culture of death” in Europe and the United States. In his 1995 encyclical, “*Evangelium Vitae*” (“The Gospel of Life”), he wrote,

“[The culture of death] is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency...[I]t is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or lifestyle of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.”

The culture of death is not a person or a group, but a *culture*, an atmosphere, or as the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago used to say, the water we swim in, that which most envelopes us, yet, at the same time, that which is most difficult to see.

For St. Pope John Paul, who was born 100 years ago this week, this culture is made up of the ground of unexamined values beneath us and the tenor of the received “wisdom” around us. It deems some questions, some issues, some people as worthy of attention, while concealing other questions, issues, and people. Culture generates what counts as “obvious” and what seems “obscure,” what deserves social approval and what deserves social scorn.

Many balked at St. Pope John Paul’s metaphor. Too harsh, they said. Too negative. Too closed-minded. Even worse, too *religious*. The world, they assure us, will be fine left to the immanent-value frameworks of secular humanism.

We don’t need a theological perspective to know how to take care of ourselves: We have science. We have experts. We can predict the problems coming and beat them when they arrive. Technology saves. We have the data. Trust us.

So we did trust or, at least, forgot to be skeptical. And here we are, better than ever at counting individuals. But how about making individuals count?

The moral philosopher Adam Smith wrote, “If [a person were] to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep tonight; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren.” To be sure, the threat we most feel from the virus is not akin to fear or “losing a little finger.” We fear for the loss of life.

Perhaps it helps to ask ourselves this: has our culture made us more capable of *seeing* the suffering of anyone beyond ourselves and our circle of affection and desire? On a personal level, do I really care about the loss of *life*, or just the loss of *my life* (and those close to me)?

When seen through the wisdom of St. Pope John Paul, this pandemic calls us to ponder this question honestly, and let the answer reveal what kind of culture we really live in.

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